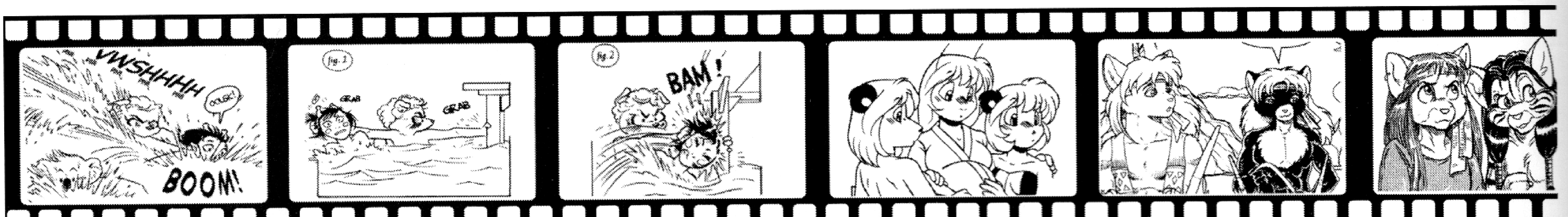
SHANDA FANTASY ARTS

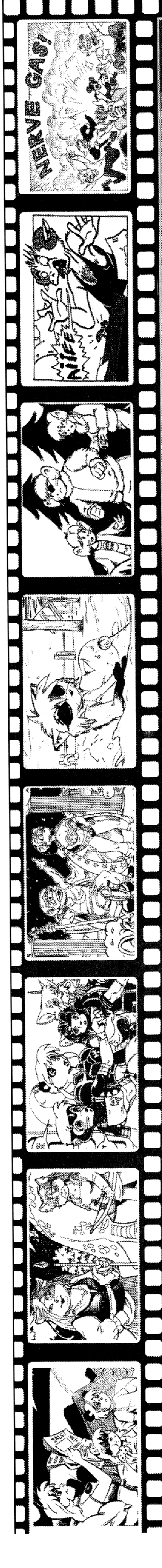
6 JAN 2006

$4.99

MATURE READERS

KATMANDU ANNUAL





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The INNER CIRCLE

THINGS ARE CHANGING IN THE WORLD OF COMICS

It's big news in the industry but not so well known yet in the reader's circle. Diamond (the largest distributor of comic books) has changed their policies on what comics they will carry according to number of copies ordered.

This is going to change the face of comics for everyone. To be sure, part of this is due to higher gas prices being paid by shippers, printers and distributors. But the publishers are feeling it first. Several independent comics have announced they are preparing to shut down, such as STRANGERS IN PARADISE and FINDER.

Here at SFA, you are holding the first effect on us. We've gone to a thinner paper stock to save on shipping and costs.We'll be doing less experimental comics, such as LAST KISS and others and concentrating more on our core titles like SHANDA, KATMANDU, EXTINCTIONERS, ALBEDO and their annuals.

Hopefully no more changes will be coming, but we will strive to continue to bring our readers the anthropomorphic entertainment they have come to expect
from Shanda Fantasy Arts for the past ten years.

Mike and Carole

www.shandafantasyarts.net

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Katmandu

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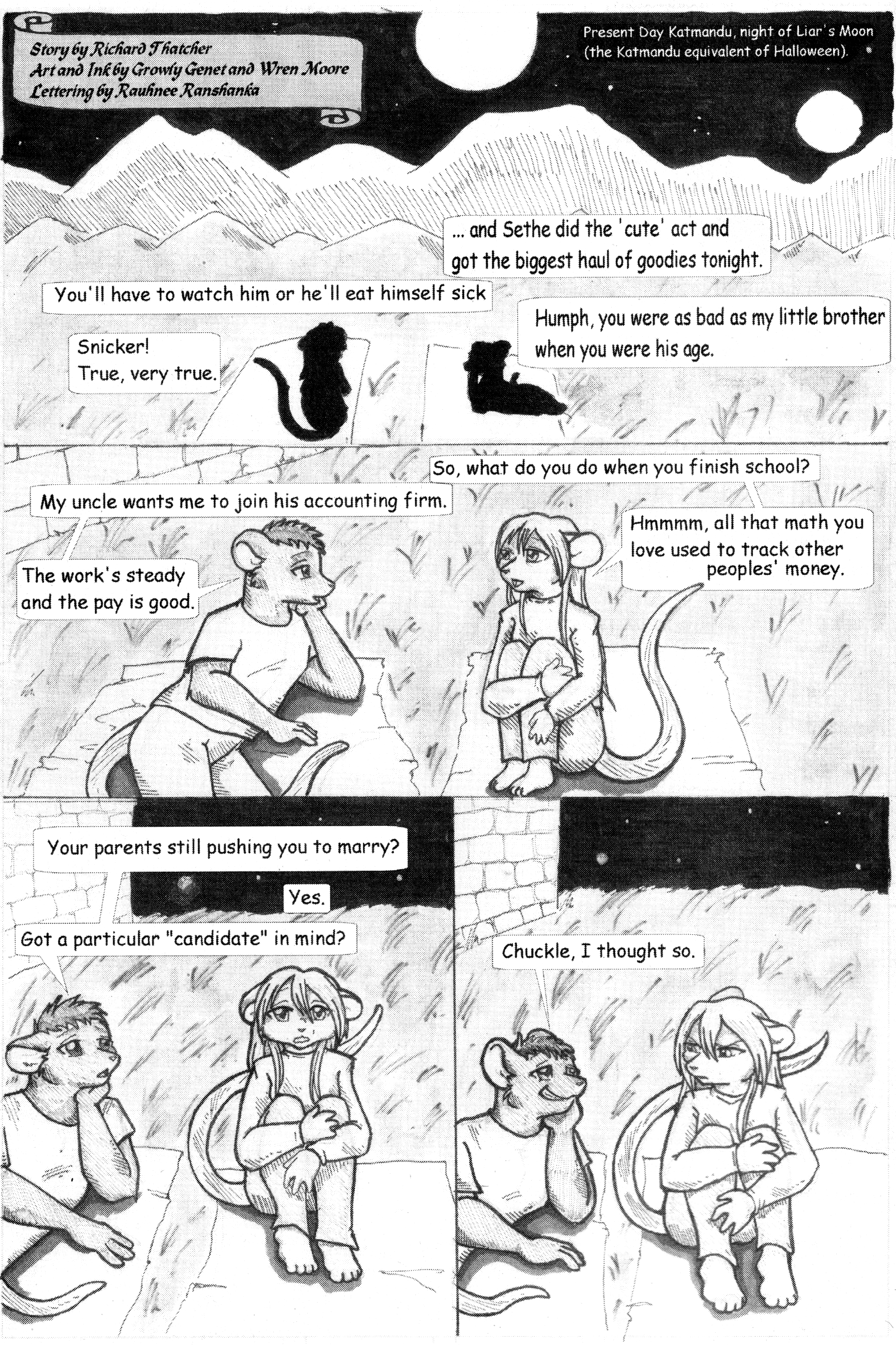
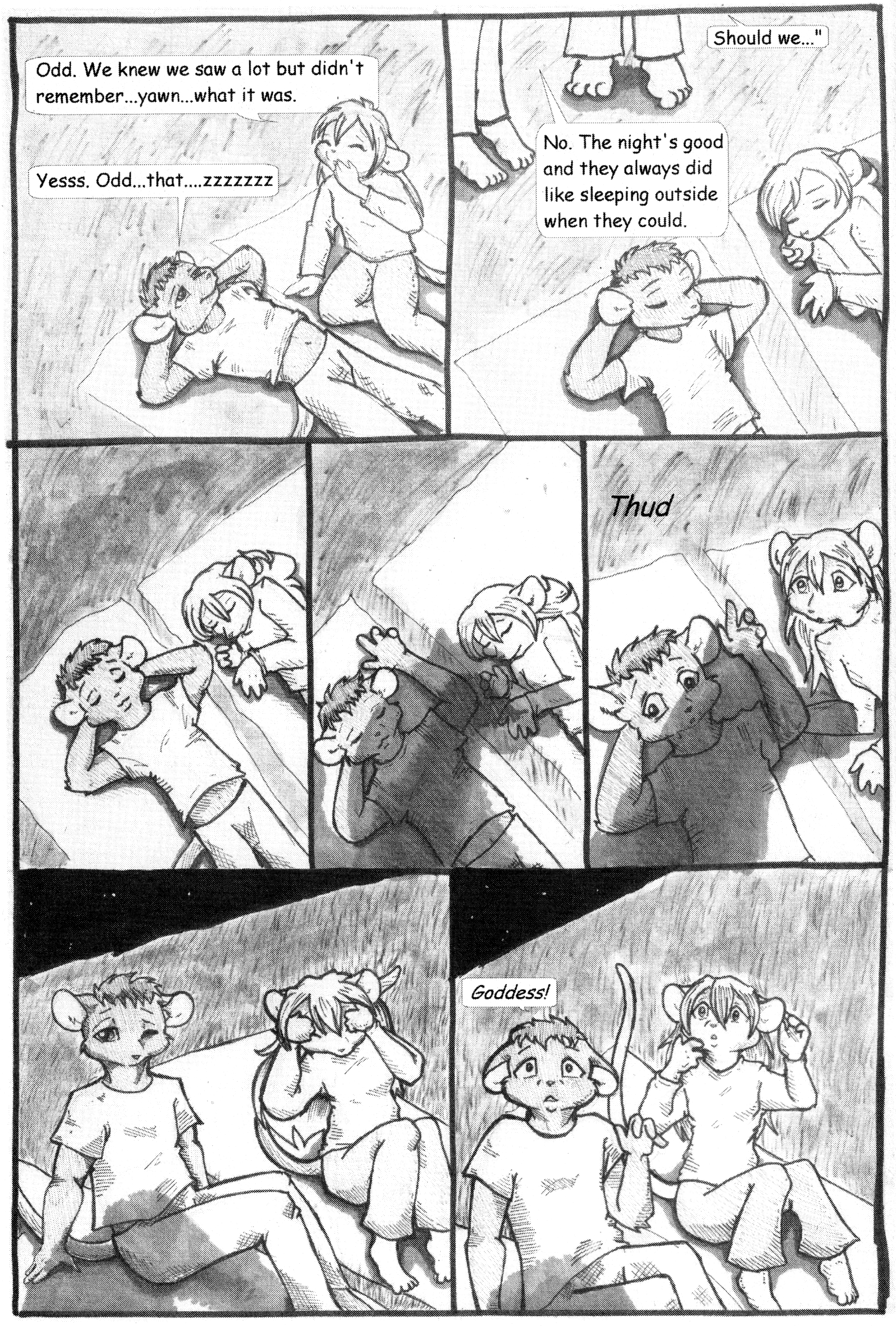
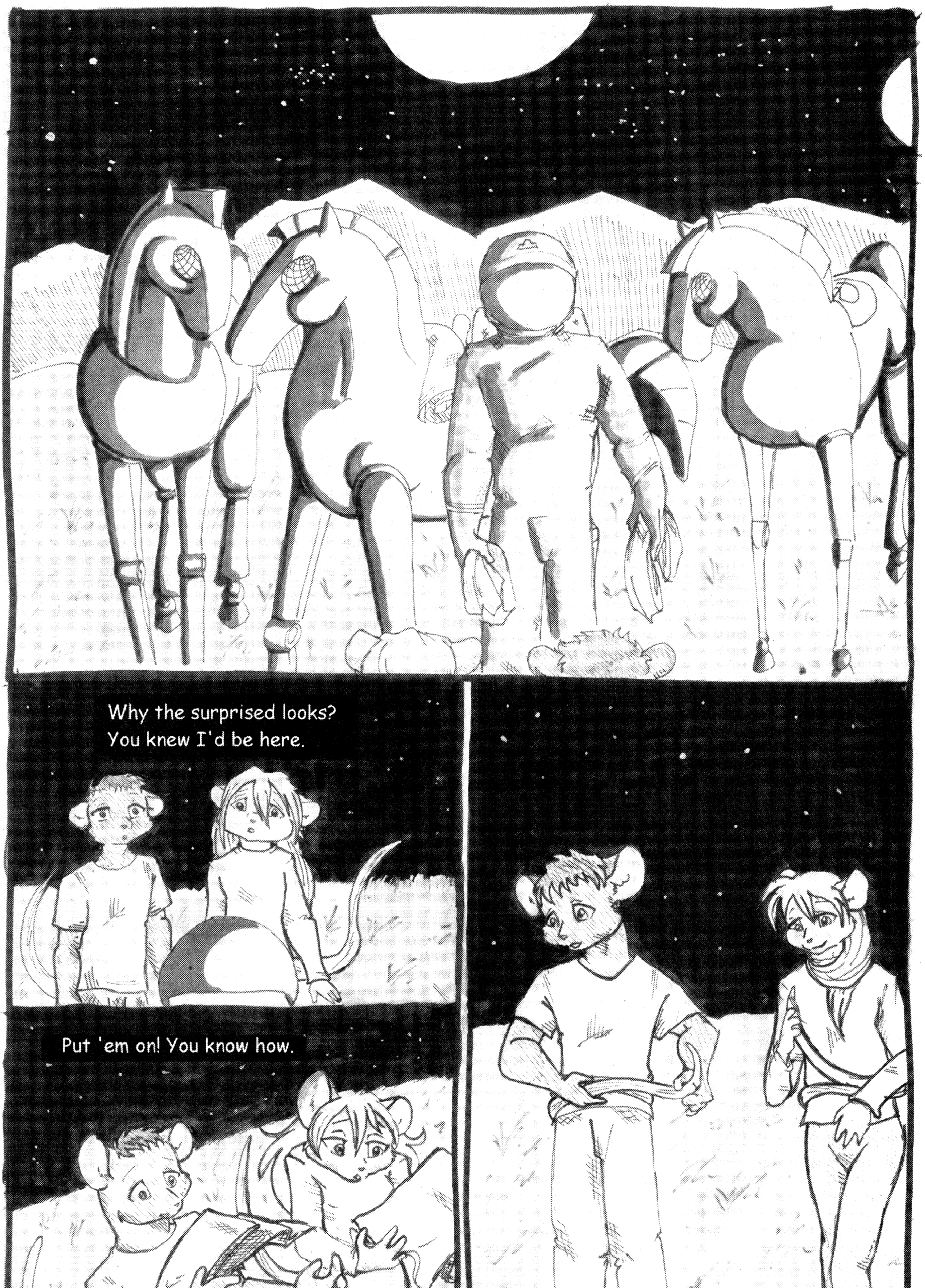
Story by Richard Thatcher
Art and Ink by Growly Genet and Wren Moore
Lettering by Rauhnee Ranshanka

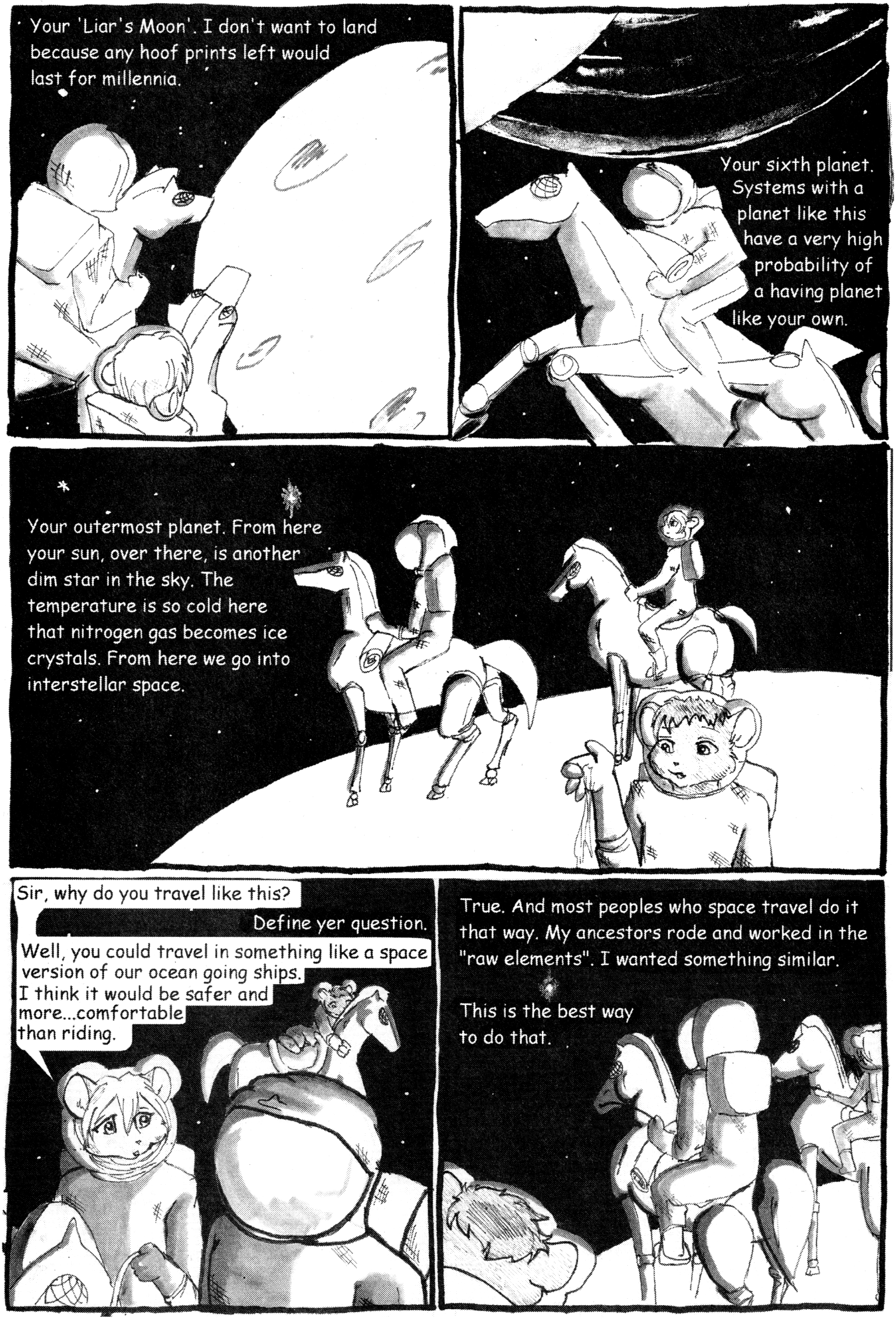
Present Day Katmandu, night of Liar's Moon (the Katmandu equivalent of Halloween).
... and Sethe did the 'cute' act and got the biggest haul of goodies tonight.
You'll have to watch him or he'll eat himself sick
Humph, you were as bad as my little brother when you were his age.
Snicker! True, very true.
So, what do you do when you finish school?
My uncle wants me to join his accounting firm.
Hmmmm, all that math you love used to track other peoples' money.
The work's steady and the pay is good.
Your parents still pushing you to marry?
Yes.
Got a particular "candidate" in mind?
Chuckle, I thought so.

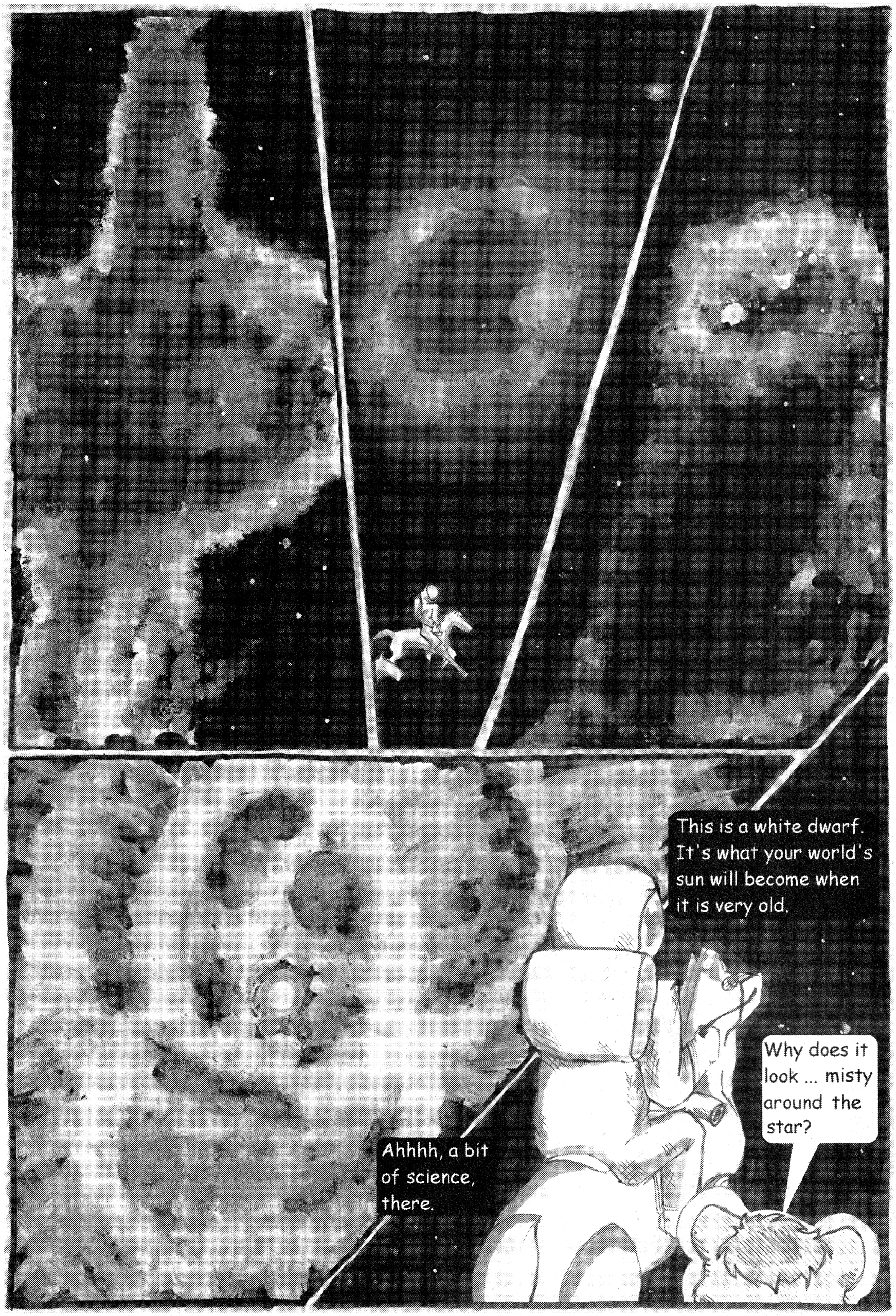
What about being an engineer? All those great projects you want to build?
Six, likely eight, years of hard work at university and no guarantee that I pass. What about your art and astronomy?
Four to six years of college and, like you, no guarantee I'd make the grade.
Sigh. Which way to go?
Always thought being an adult made things easier. Guess life isn't all that simple after all.
Hmmmm, remember those dreams we had when we were younger?
Where we wore silver colored coveralls and helmets and rode the odd looking beasts all over the stars?
Yes, those.
We never figured out how the spindly legged creatures supported their own weight plus a rider.

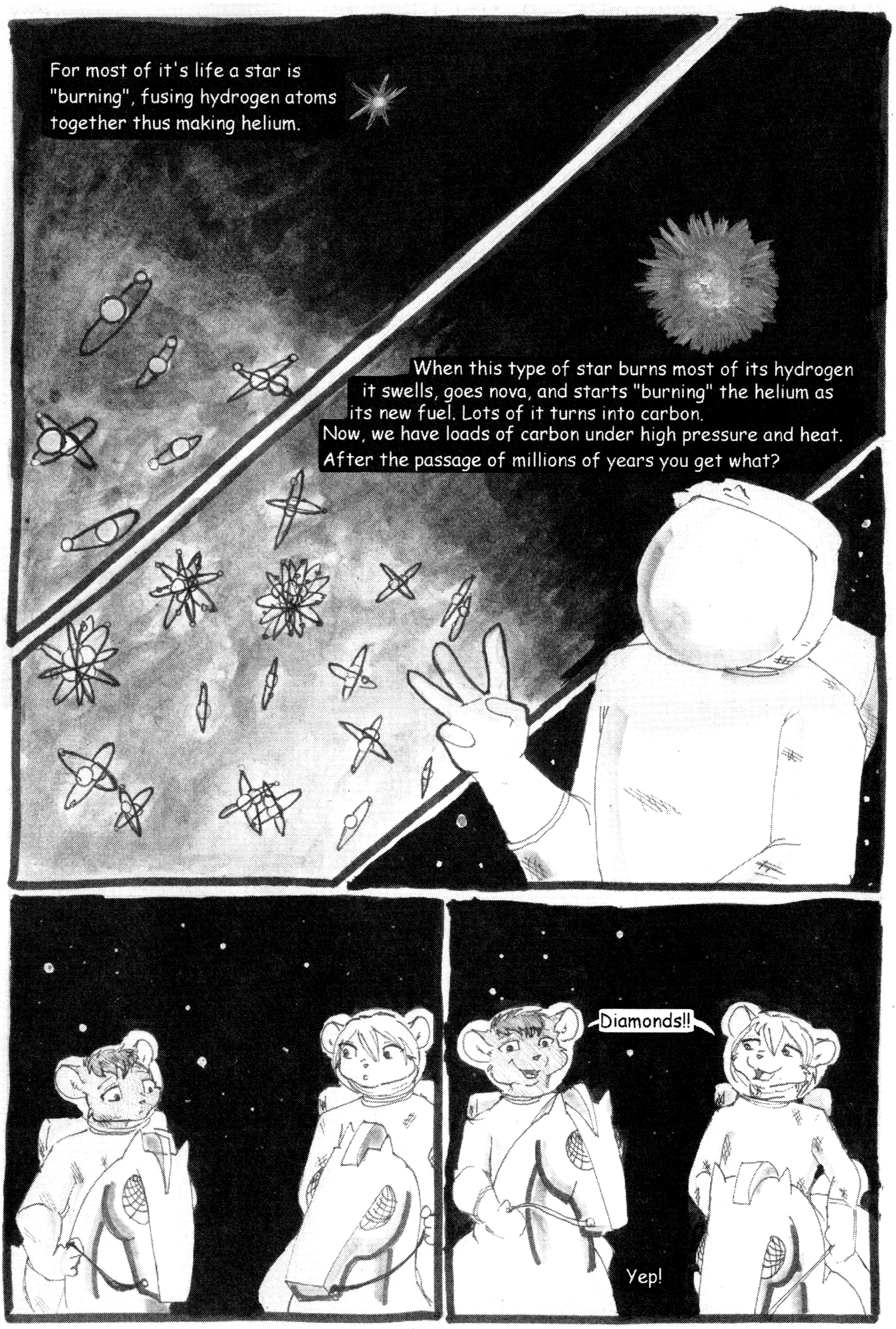

Odd. We knew we saw a lot but didn't remember...yawn...what it was.
Yesss. Odd...that....zzzzzzz
Should we..."
No. The night's good and they always did like sleeping outside when they could.
Thud
Goddess!

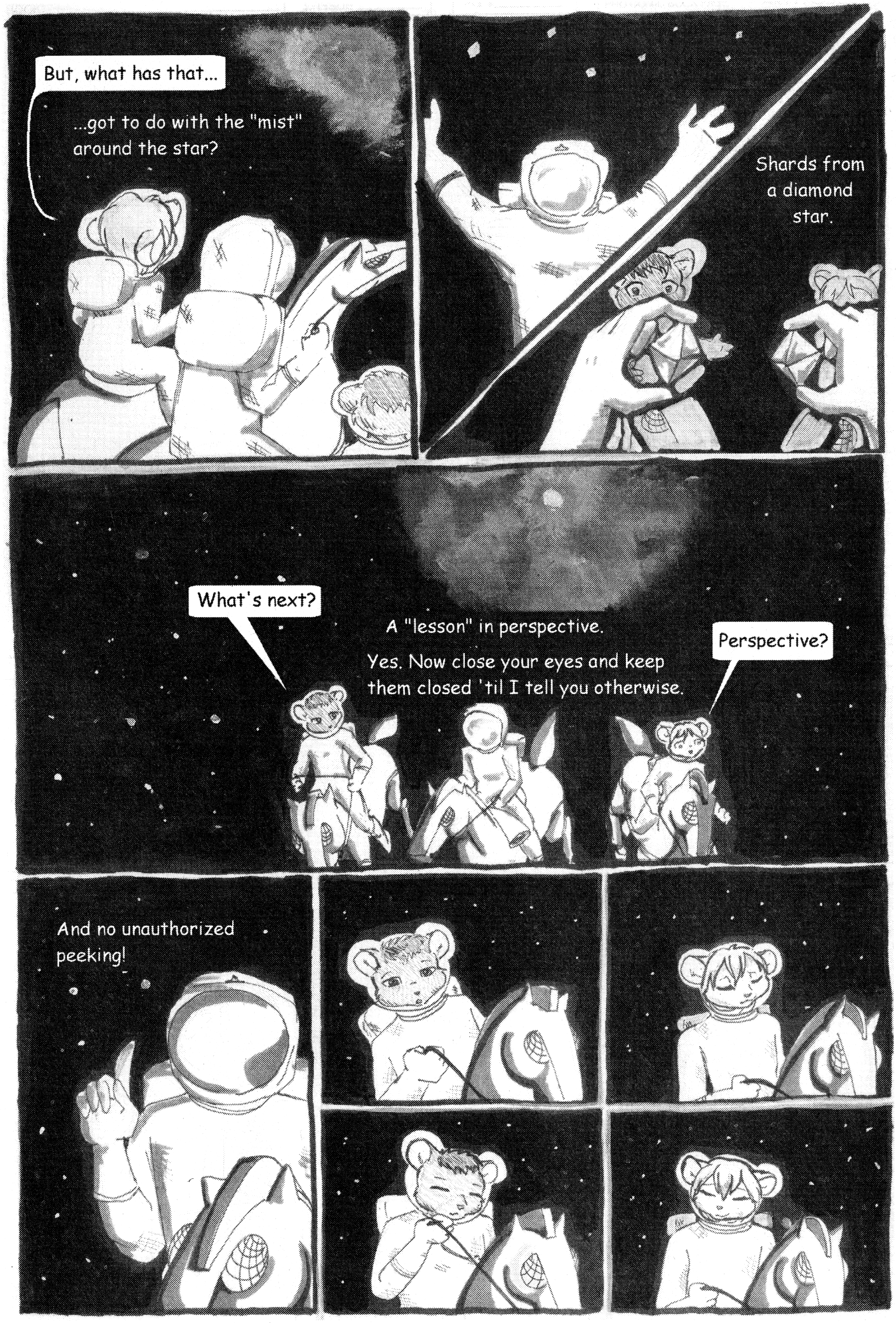

Why the surprised looks?
You knew I'd be here.
Put 'em on! You know how.

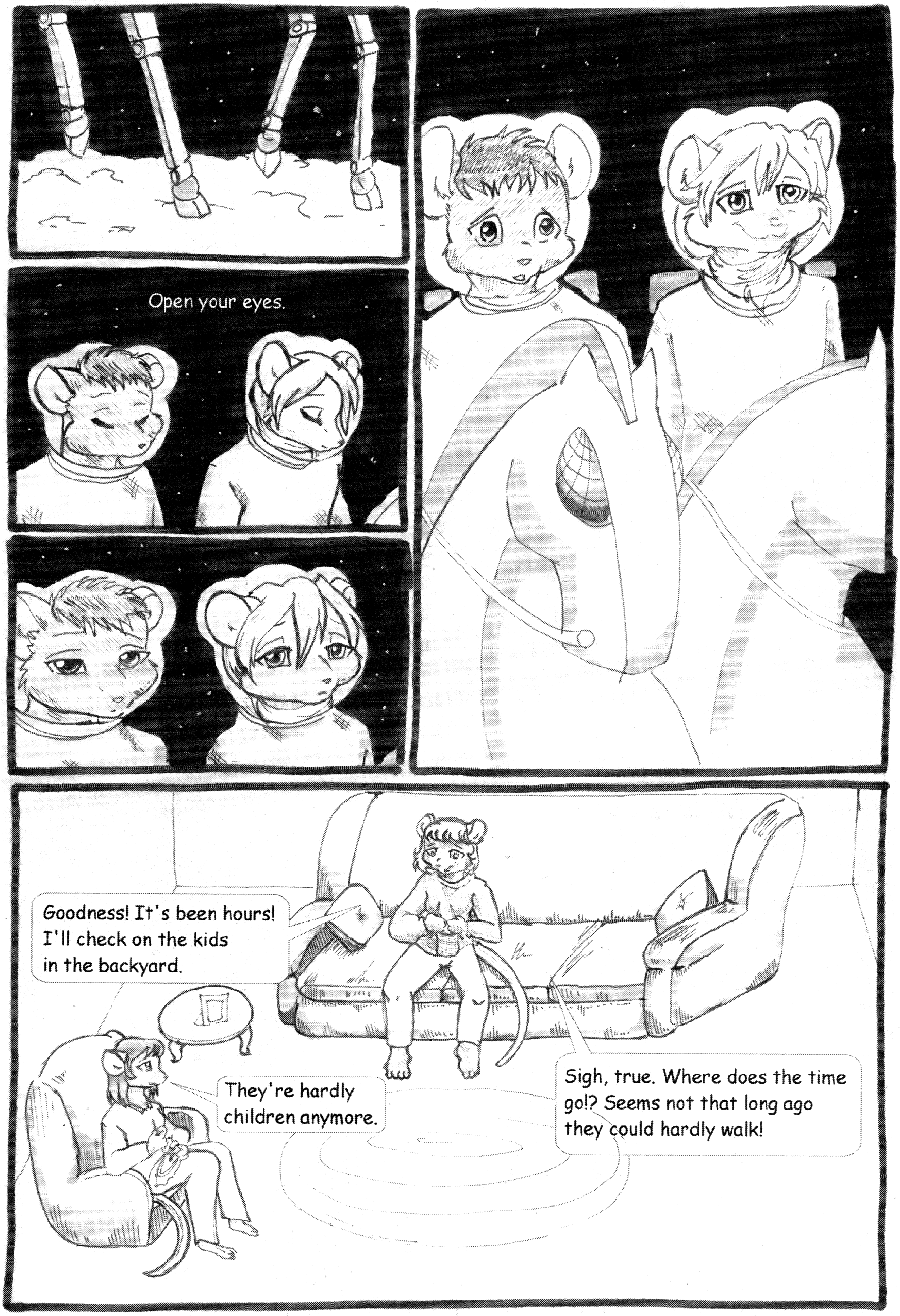
See, You remembered. Hit the saddle, you two! We got a lot of range to cover!


Your 'Liar's Moon'. I don't want to land because any hoof prints left would last for millennia.
Your sixth planet. Systems with a planet like this have a very high probability of a having planet like your own.
Your outermost planet. From here your sun, over there, is another dim star in the sky. The temperature is so cold here that nitrogen gas becomes ice crystals. From here we go into interstellar space.
Sir, why do you travel like this?
Define yer question.
Well, you could travel in something like a space version of our ocean going ships. I think it would be safer and more...comfortable than riding.
True. And most peoples who space travel do it that way. My ancestors rode and worked in the "raw elements". I wanted something similar.
This is the best way to do that.

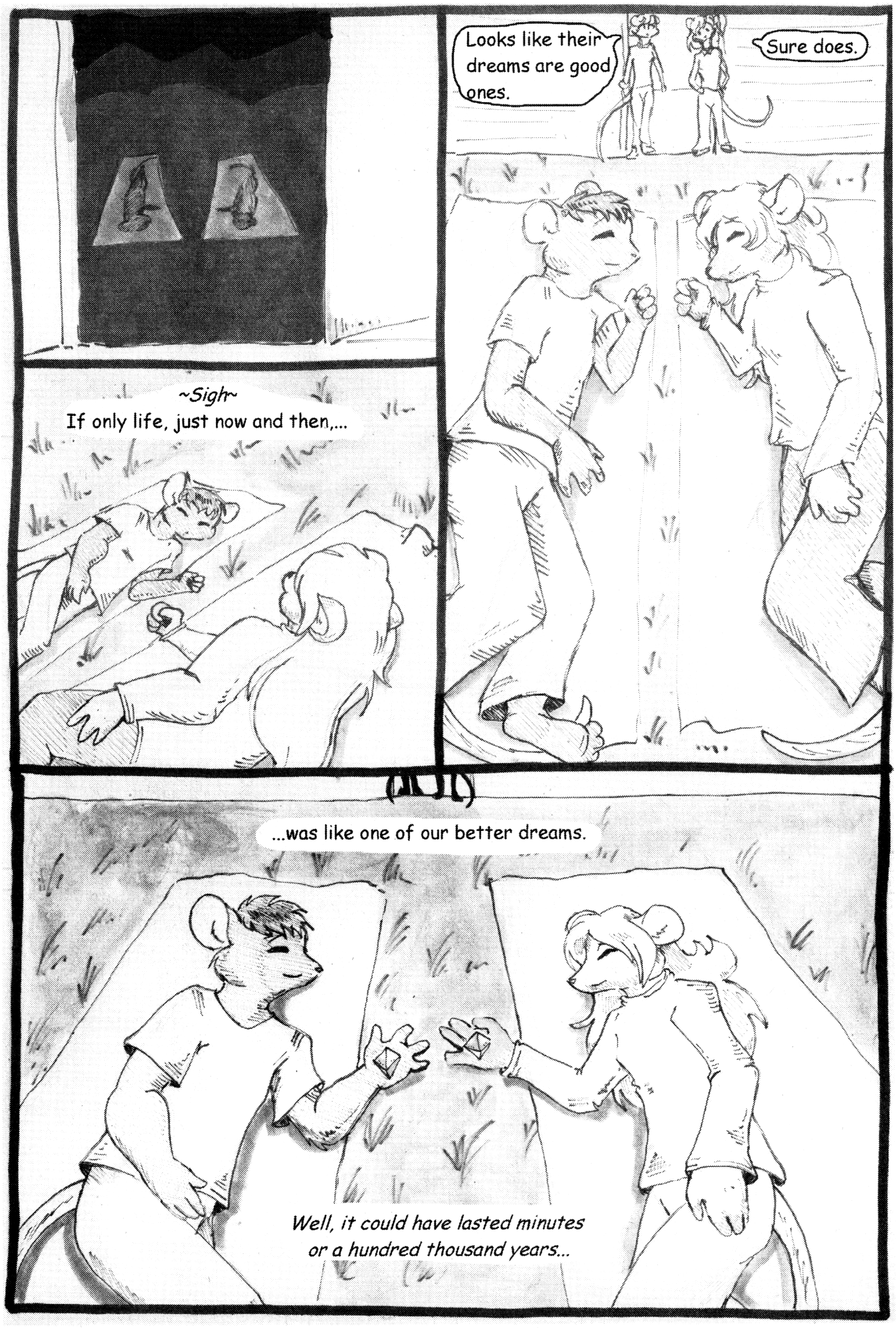

This is a white dwarf. It's what your world's sun will become when it is very old.
Why does it look ... misty around the star?
Ahhhh, a bit of science, there.


For most of it's life a star is "burning", fusing hydrogen atoms together thus making helium.
When this type of star burns most of its hydrogen it swells, goes nova, and starts "burning" the helium as its new fuel. Lots of it turns into carbon.
Now, we have loads of carbon under high pressure and heat. After the passage of millions of years you get what?
Diamonds!!
Yep!


But, what has that...
...got to do with the "mist" around the star?
Shards from a diamond star.
What's next?
A "lesson" in perspective.
Perspective?
Yes. Now close your eyes and keep them closed 'til I tell you otherwise.
And no unauthorized peeking!


Open your eyes.
Goodness! It's been hours! I'll check on the kids in the backyard.
They're hardly children anymore.
Sigh, true. Where does the time go!? Seems not that long ago they could hardly walk!

This is a galaxy cluster. The one in the crook of the L holds your sun. There are, literally, hundreds of millions of other stars in your galaxy. And for every star there are thousands of other galaxies. Places, peoples, and worlds almost without end!
Listen t' an old range rider, you two. Life's like your galaxy, this universe. Full of all kinds of unknowns: Good and bad. Pleasant and not so pleasant. Good spells and rough range. You can homestead and avoid a lot of it or...
...you can saddle up and - braving saddle sores, throws, sights and all - ride life for all it has to give! It's riskier, but a lot more interestin' and satisfyin' when you reach Trail's End. The choice is yours and yours alone.


Looks like their dreams are good ones.
Sure does.
~Sigh~
If only life, just now and then,...
...was like one of our better dreams.
Well, it could have lasted minutes or a hundred thousand years...

Well, Pard? You going to stand there....
...or...?

The Ghost and The Darkness

By Karl Wolfemann

Long ago, this city was a small village. It had stood for nearly fifty years, the largest village within a month's journey, and it was quite prosperous.

But it is the will of the gods that such prosperity should not go without being tested. And so the terror began...a terror called Kizuka and Kiza. The Ghost, and the Darkness.

They were a pair of powerful Lions that lived to kill, hidden cannibals that lived in the wilderness, returning to the village only long enough to claim a victim and return to the savannah. No goods would be taken, only the victims, sometimes from their very own homes. Their screams would be heard for hours after, and they would never be found again.

Rumors spread that the killers were not mortals – that they were demons, sent by the gods to punish the wicked for unknown sins. Nobody ever saw more than a glimpse of the two murderers, and they could enter a home, steal somebody out of their bed, and leave without being noticed. They even stole the village chief from his bed, leaving his wives and children untouched. For their skill, they were given their names, names whispered in hushed, frightened voices.

But as the attacks continued, and the terror spread, whispered rumors about the victims gave way to panicked prayers to the gods for forgiveness, for some hero to come forward and end the suffering of the people. Finally, after hundreds of people had disappeared, and even more warriors ventured out into the savannah, never to return, a young, tawny-furred Jackal came from the plains and offered to stop Kizuka and Kiza. The Great Spirit had come to him, and told him the secret of stopping the assassins. In exchange, he wished for the hand of the old village chieftain's daughter in marriage, and that his people would be considered brothers and allies of the villagers.

While the nomads were distrusted by all the villagers, and the thought of a marriage-bond between Jackal and Lion distasteful, they agreed. The villagers were desperate enough that they were willing to agree to anything, if only the attacks would stop. The young Jackal, called Shuja, sealed the oath, and then disappeared into the tall grass, carrying nothing but a spear and the clothes on his back.

For days, there were no attacks. There were no sounds from the savannah. There was no word from Shuja. Brave hunters, willing to stare down any beast of the plains, would only leave the village because they knew that its walls were no protection from Kizuka and Kiza.

Then, nearly a week later, Shuja returned. He bore the scars of a great battle, and his spear was broken, but he carried with him the hide of a great Lion.

"This is Kizuka, the Ghost," he said tiredly. "I faced him in battle, and was victorious. I ask the peace of your village for the night, before I return to seek the Darkness."

A great feast was made for the Jackal. The finest food and drink the village had left were offered to him, but he only accepted a bowl of manioc, a gourd of water, and some roasted meat. The Lionesses of the village, casting aside their concerns about associating with a Jackal, offered him the comfort of their homes, but he accepted only a bedroll beside the bonfire, near the stake that bore the hide of Kizuka.

The villagers celebrated through the day...but the celebration stilled when the sun set, and an anguished roar echoed from the savannah.

"That is the Darkness," Shuja said softly. "He has found his lover."

Stillness fell over the village as they were reminded that, while the Jackal had freed them from the grip of one of the warriors, another remained. Swiftly, the celebration came to a halt, people returning to their homes, hoping that they would be safe for the night.

After all, the fool Jackal sleeping in the middle of the village was the one who had slain Kizuka; with any luck, Kiza would only take him, and leave them be.

Only the old Chief's daughter, Kibibi, remained at the side of Shuja, her future husband if he slew Kiza. The two of them talked long into the night, the Lioness' company helping the warrior stave off the exhaustion of his great battle. He told her the story of how he had defeated Kizuka...and the secret that the Great Spirit had taught him.

"Kizuka and Kiza were brothers, and lovers," he explained. "They were cast out by the people of this village when their secret was discovered a generation ago, before you were born. Since then, they have fought hard to survive...and they have learned to hate. The two of them swore a pact, that when they had the power they would return and teach the meaning of fear to the villagers who had exiled them for their sin.

"They are great warriors on their own, there is no denying that. But what made them invincible, what gave them the power to slay with impunity, was the fear of their victims. When the Great Spirit told me this, I realized that the secret to killing them was to face them without fear, to look death in the eye and accept it as my due, if it was the cost of ending their threat to the village and to my people."

"To your people?" The Lioness asked. She had thought they only preyed on the villagers; that they might also hunt the nomads had never occurred to her.

"They protect their territory, which grows ever wider as they become more confident," Shuja explained. "They have already fought with our hunters. Fought with them, and killed them. If we did not move to different territory, they would have sought to destroy us. But the land of my tribe has been ours for longer than this village has stood; I will not let two Lions take it from us. Not without a fight. And now that Kizuka is dead," he continued, getting to his feet, looking at his broken spear wistfully before casting it into the bonfire, "I must finish the battle."

"But you have no weapon," Kibibi pointed out, deeply worried for Shuja. "How can you hope to defeat Kiza unarmed?"

"I do have a weapon, my lady," Shuja said with a wry smile. "The weapon I took from Kizuka when I killed him." Kibibi looked at the Jackal as though he were mad, then at the gate to the village as she heard something begin to climb the wall, her own eyes filled with fright...but she trusted the Jackal.

Kizuka and Kiza had relied on fear to weaken their prey. Now Shuja had slain Kizuka, the largest Lion any of the villagers had seen. He hadn't feared Kizuka, and he didn't fear Kiza.

The great Lion landed on the inside of the village wall and bellowed in rage. He charged for the bonfire, seeing people standing nearby. He would have his revenge....

Then, as he paused nearby, Kibibi understood what Shuja had meant. Kiza stared up at the pelt of his brother and lover, and then looked down at the Jackal standing proudly, bravely beneath it. For a generation Kiza had fought, and fought bravely, facing all foes with the confidence of a warrior who knew that he would be victorious.

But he had always fought alongside his brother. His brother, the elder of the pair. His brother, who had been slightly stronger, slightly larger.

Who had been slain by this Jackal not a day before, skinned like a common beast, and left to dangle from a pole near a bonfire.

The loss of his brother kindled a deep, unabiding rage in the remaining Lion, but it kindled the spark of something else as well.

Kiza was afraid. Afraid to fight alone, afraid to face a foe that honor demanded he fight, to avenge his brother's death.

But he would not let that fear paralyze him.

Kibibi ran from the battle at Shuja's urging, as Kiza bellowed again and charged towards him.

For hours the two of them fought. Shuja was tired, sore, and without a weapon. Kiza was fresh to the fight, but had never before fought without his brother, not without knowing his brother was there to help him. Deep down inside, they both knew the outcome of this battle already.

Kiza grabbed hold of Shuja, lifting him high above his head and casting him into the fire. The Jackal screamed in pain, the bonfire burning the fur of his body, searing his flesh.

The Lion turned, falling to his knees and roaring in anguish as he looked up at the violated remains of his brother, his lover, his other half.

He didn't even try to dodge the shattered, flaming end of Shuja's spear, the Jackal forcing himself out of the flame with the haft of his weapon, hardened by the fire, to drive the splintered wood through the heart of the Darkness.

The two warriors lay there, seemingly dead. After what felt like an eternity, Kibibi rushed out to see if Shuja still lived...and found, much to her delight, that he did.

The celebration of Kiza's death, and the liberation of the village from the Ghost and the Darkness, made the celebration of Kizuka's look tiny by comparison. Every village for a week's journey came to join the Lions in their exultations.

But the entire time, the Jackal who had saved them lay in bed, being nursed back to health by his future wife, if he survived.

By the time he recovered, the Lions of the village had come to an agreement. They would claim the glory for slaying Kizuka and Kiza, not the Jackal nomad. They would be the great warriors known throughout history. Kibibi protested, but the villagers quickly shouted her down. All that remained was to deal with Shuja.

When he finally emerged from Kibibi's home, his fur was growing back, but it was now singed black by the heat of the flames. He supported himself with a staff and Kibibi's arm, still not able to walk on his own. It would be a long time before the warrior's strength returned to him, but he was satisfied with what he had done.

What he was not satisfied with was the stack of mutton he was told to return to his people with, payment for his services.

"We had an oath," he told the new Chieftain. "Kibibi's hand in marriage, and friendship between our people."

"We had no such oath, Jackal," the Lion sneered. He was larger than either Kizuka or Kiza in stature, but he had cowered along with the others when they had reigned. But now, with them dead, he had claimed the right from his comrades to steal the glory from Shuja. "Consider yourself lucky to get this much; no Lion would believe your word over mine."

Shuja sighed and shook his head, leaning heavily on his staff.

"The Spirit warned me, but I did not want to believe," he said softly. "And yet, deep in my liver, I knew it would be the case. Know this; Kiza and Kizuka were cast from this village because they sinned in your people's eyes. They returned here because you had sinned in theirs.

"And now you have broken an oath made in the name of the Great Spirit.

"The Ghost and the Darkness shall return, and you shall never be rid of them. It will not be soon; it will take many years, perhaps not until those living now are dead and dust, but they will return. This is the punishment for your sins." With that, he started to walk towards the gate, leaving the mutton behind, moving painfully. Kibibi looked at the new Chief, and spat at his feet before running to join Shuja.

"I will keep our oath," she told him, taking his arm and offering him her support.

"Thank you," the Jackal smiled. "You may help to atone for your people's crimes...and I will be a good husband for you."

And so the two of them left. Shuja would go on to become the greatest of his people's heroes, though his fur would always be black, as would that of his children. This is why, even today, many Jackals have black fur, while most have golden brown. Kizuka and Kiza did indeed return, in the form of their disciples. That is why, even today, the great Sultans whisper the names of the Ghost and the Darkness only in the safest of chambers. And Kibibi would go on to become a great queen of the nomads, and unite them with the village- people, her husband always at her side....

But that is a story for another evening.

~~~~~ ***** ~~~~~

Kizuka and Kiza (Ghost and Darkness), CE Gods of Fear and Death
Symbol: Arms crossed in an `x' across the chest, claws bare
Domains: Bestial, Chaos, Darkness, Death, Evil
Worshippers: Assassins, Barbarians, Cannibals, Lions, Murderers, Torturers

Shuja, LG God of Warriors and Heroes
Symbol: A broken spear, the haft on fire
Domains: Law, Good, War (Flaming spear), Strength, Knowledge
Worshippers: Defenders, Jackals, Warriors

Kibibi, LG Goddess of Nobility
Symbol: A silk knot
Domains: Law, Good, Glory, Healing, Community
Worshippers: Lions, Jackals, Noblewomen
~~~~~

& Extro
Nexus

NEXUS SAVANNAH

'Provider'

By

Chakat 'Kit' Stripedfur

Pyndan.

You know I love you, but it is still too soon for me. The pain of Rial's death is still fresh in my mind, and his face still haunts my dreams.

Thank you for comforting me each night, as we cuddle together under the furs, but for now we must remain just mates.

Maybe in the future things will be different, I do not know; and Mother Sanna cannot or will not tell me.

Please, do not be sad! You are a good father, and you provide for us well, so be proud; if not of yourself then be proud of us, for our kits are strong and healthy.

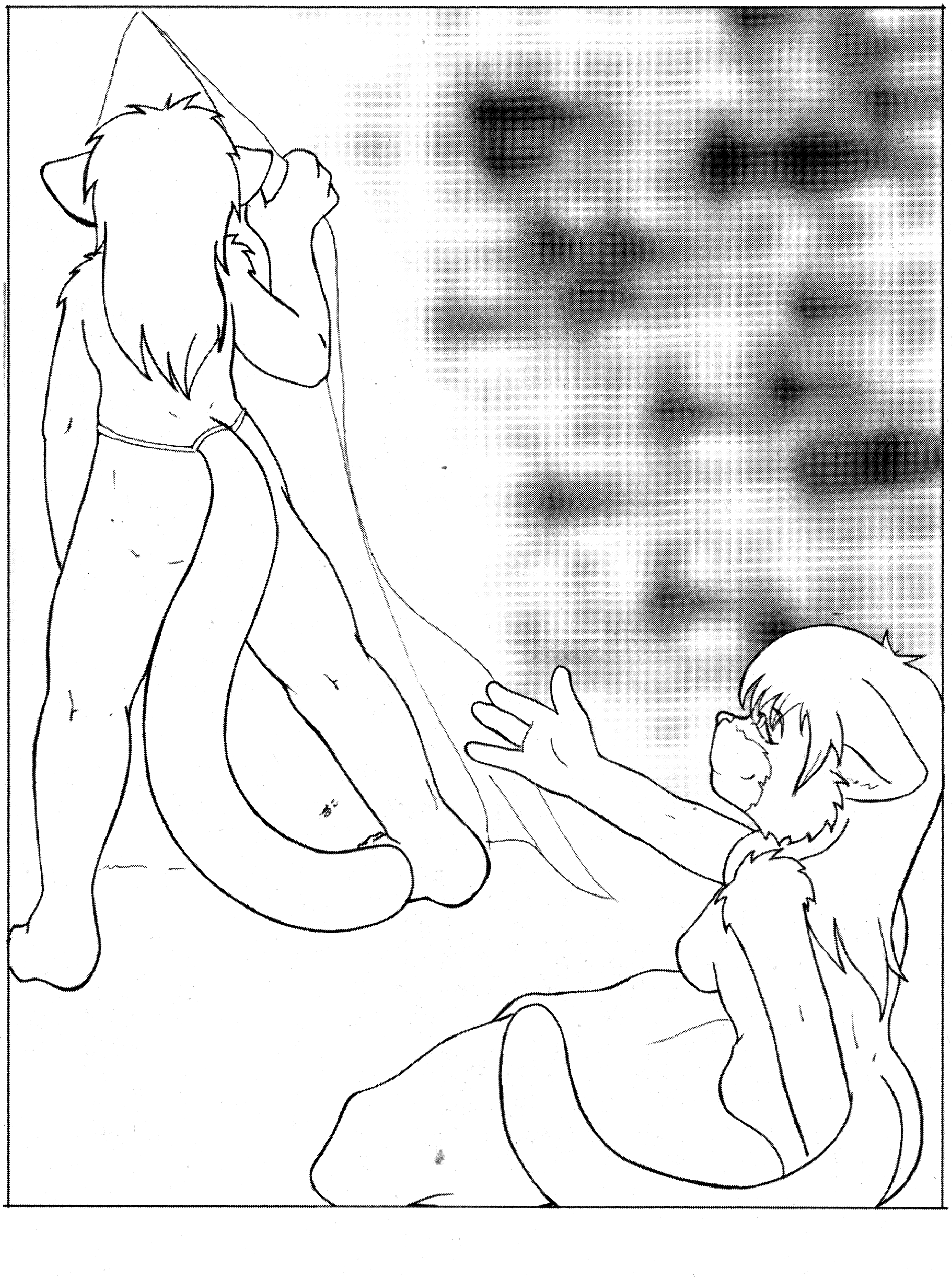
I know you fear the curse of your bloodline, but surely the Goddess has forgiven you by now?

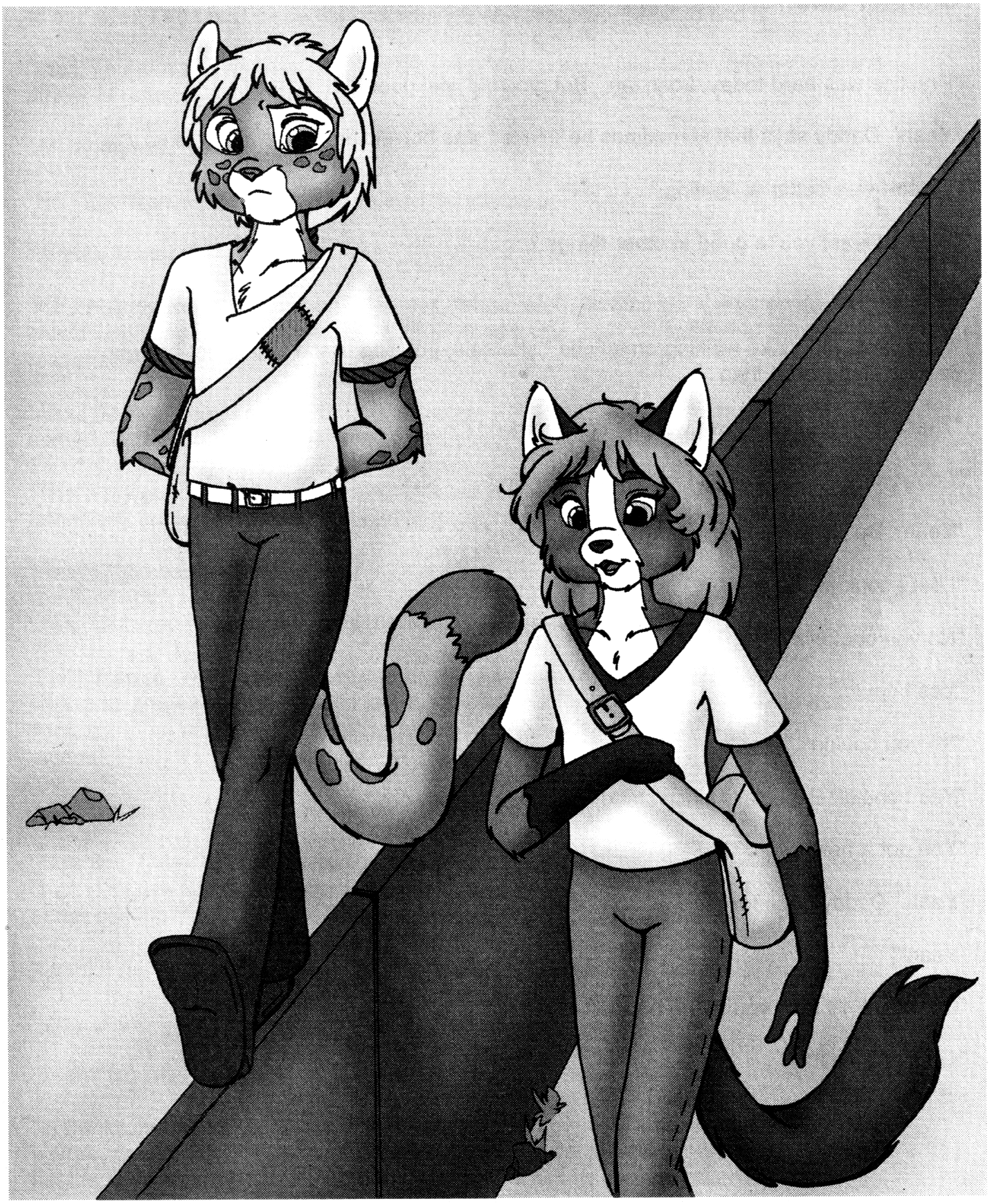
Surely She has seen your heart, and knows it to be kind and generous? You have provided for us, and loved us, as well as anyone ever could. I know Rial would be proud of you, and rests easy knowing that you are taking care of us.

So please, come to bed, and keep me warm. For the night is cold, and I can think of other ways to ward off the chill.

Your mate,

Liska





Katmandu II: Tambo

By Kit Mouri

Chapter One: Join Us.

"Practice was hard today, Loanzah. But, you did real good."

"Yeah. Daddy says that sometimes he thinks I was born to fight."

"I wish I was better at fighting."

"Well, at least you're good at other things."

"Like what?"

"Like...like...oh! Like walking on fences." she said, pointing to the fence that he was walking along even then.

"That's nothing. What can walking on fences do?"

"I don't know. But, it's still kind of neat, Emilio."

"Yeah. But, I want to learn how to fight, better."

"I bet I could teach you."

"No you couldn't."

"Yes I could."

"No you couldn't."

"Yes I could! Especially since Daddy got me a new sword."

"You got a new sword?"

"Yeah. Daddy got it for me. Wanna see it?"

"Yeah!"

"Come on! I'll race you to the house!"

"1...2...3...GO!"

****

"MILPUL!" Leahtrah yelled, after hearing a loud crash erupt from the kittens' room. "What was that?" she asked, rushing to him.

"Aw, it was just the dresser, Mama." her son said, as clambered from behind it. "I was looking for my truck. The one Daddy helped me build."

"You mean after I told you to clean this room?" she asked, as she checked the child for any cuts or bruises from the crash.

"I was cleaning, Mama. But, then I remembered that Uncle Layn told me that he wanted to see what I had built since the last time we saw him. So, I had to find it."

"Well, I suppose that's true. But, I still expect you to have this room cleaned by the time dinner is ready."

"All by myself?"

"No. Loanzah will help when she gets home from practice."

"What's Kemal doing?"

"He's helping me in the kitchen. Besides," she added, holding up a wooden sword and shield while gesturing to a host of other pretend battle tools. "I know that he wasn't responsible for this mess."

Milpul had nothing to say to that. She did have a point. Instead, he nodded his head and started to gather the litter that was strewn about the floor.

"That's my good boy." Leahtrah said. "I'll tell you what. If you finish up here before your father and uncles get home, you can help me make cookies for them."

"Really?" he beamed.

"Yes. But, you have to have this room totally clean, understand?"

"I will, Mama! You'll see." he replied as he picked up the pace in his cleaning. Leahtrah smiled as she exited the room to join Kemal in the kitchen where he was sitting on the floor, stirring a mixture in a large ceramic bowl. He looked up from his mixing as she entered.

"Is Milpul alright, Mother?" he asked with concern.

"He's fine, Love." she answered as she kneeled beside him. "He just tipped the dresser, is all. I'll have Daddy set it back up when he comes home with your uncles. How's that batter coming?".

"I think I got all the lumps out. I don't see them anymore."

"Very good. Then, we're ready to-..."

"Leah?" a voice called.

"In the kitchen, Kiki!" Leahtrah called back. After a moment's passing, the head of a woman peered into the kitchen, shortly followed by the remainder of her. She was a hoplite like Thorin and his kin, but uncommonly small by their standards, even for a female. Dark, ebony eyes mirrored the rich portions of hair that peeked out from beneath a colorful headdress that bound whatever more locks she might have possessed.

"Sorry to barge in, Leah, but your door was open." The woman, Kichoro Tambo, said.

"That's alright." Leahtrah replied. "It's no bother. We were just preparing dinner for tonight."

"We?"

"Here I am, Mrs. Tambo." Kemal chimed from behind Leahtrah's kneeling form. He peeked out from behind her and smiled, timidly.

"Well, hello, Kemal. Busy helping Mother, I see."

He smiled and blushed a bit, then simply nodded his head.

"Have you been practicing your piece for the festival?"

"Yes!" he exclaimed with excitement. "I'm going to show my uncles when they get here. ...because, Mother said that she would sit with me if I did." he added, shyly.

Leahtrah patted her bashful child's head and smiled down at him, fondly. She then turned her attention back to her lady friend and asked, "So, what brings you over, today?"

"Well, actually I'm looking for Emilio. After school practice was over quite a while ago. Still, he hasn't come home yet, so I figured that he might be over here."

"Hmm...I haven't seen him or Loanzah just yet. But, they do have a habit of straying a bit. I'm sure that they'll be tumbling through the doors any-..."

"**YEEAH!**" was the rebel yell that sounded through the house, interrupting Leahtrah in her thoughts.

"**HEY! NO FAIR, LOANZAH!**" came the cry from another.

"Never mind. " Leahtrah and Kichoro sighed in unison.

The two mothers left the house and journeyed to the backyard where an epic battle was being waged. Pinned against a tree with a wooden sword pressed against his chest, holding him at bay was Emilio. While at the other end of the weapon, Loanzah reigned in triumph at her defeat of the scoundrel she had cornered. She paused in her conquest to address the lad's exclamation.

"What's no fair?" she asked.

"I didn't know that we were going to fight." Emilio replied, as he attempted to sidestep his way away from the end of the sword. Yet, Loanzah wasn't at the top of her junior self-defense class for nothing and nimbly followed his movements with her harmless, yet somehow effective weapon. "Besides," he continued. "I don't even have a sword. How am I supposed to fight back?"

"You're not supposed to be fighting at all." Kichoro interjected.

The kittens turned to see two disapproving mothers glaring at two disobedient kittens. Dropping her weapon at her side, Loanzah quickly took up a position of submission standing beside her friend. This was not going to be pretty.

"You know you're supposed to come straight home when practice is over." Kichoro continued.

"I'm sorry, Mama." Emilio said. "I guess I forgot."

"It's not his fault, Mrs. Tambo." Loanzah said, valiantly coming to her friend's defense. "I asked him to come over so he could see the new sword that Daddy got for me." she added, holding the toy before her.

"And weren't you supposed to be helping your brother clean up that room?" Leahtrah said. "Your father will be back with your uncles soon and that room looks like a tornado ran through it."

"Oh, yeah. I guess I forgot, too. Sorry." the girl said, absently tugging at her ear in an embarrassed manner. Leahtrah picked up on her daughter's behavior and decided that the awkward situation she was in was punishment enough. She was truly sorry.

"Never mind, Loanzah." she said, her tone significantly softer than before. "Why don't you just run along and give your brother a hand."

"Okay, Mama. Bye, Emilio." she said, as she trotted away and into the house.

"Bye, Loanzah." Emilio called out after her.

"We'd better be getting back ourselves." Kichoro said. "I'm sure you've got homework to do." she added, tapping her son lightly on the head.

Emilio frowned before replying, "Yeah. Teacher gave us twice as much as usual on account of the holiday. He said it would help to keep us out of trouble."

"He must not have kittens of his own." Leahtrah giggled.

"Indeed not." Kichoro agreed, chuckling along. "At any rate, I am sorry for the inconvenience, Leah."

"Don't give it another thought. It was no bother." She paused for a moment then added, "In fact, why don't you and Emilio join us for dinner tonight."

"Oh, I don't know!" she answered, quickly. "After all, you have family coming over tonight and..."

"And that's exactly why I'm inviting you over. When Thorin, the kittens and I moved here, you and your family were the first and truly the only ones to openly welcome us. Now, I want to open my family to yours."

"I-...I don't..."

"Please, Mama?" Emilio chirped. "I promise to do all my homework! I'll even take a bath if you say yes!"

"You'll take a bath even if I say no." she retorted.

Emilio smiled at that then asked, once again, "Please, Mama...so I can play with Loanzah again?"

Kichoro sighed, deeply. "Very well. If it pleases you, Leah, then Emilio and I will join you and your family for dinner tonight."

****

The sky had donned her evening dress, her beautiful magenta cloak coloring the plains in its brilliant hue. Beneath her enchanting expanse, Kichoro and Emilio strode on their way to their rendezvous with the Leonius family. Although the world was light and at peace, its earthbound inhabitants were less so... at least, one of them.

"Emilio, Dear, don't kick up the dirt like that." Kichoro chided. "You'll get your clothes all dirty and dusty."

"Aww, Mama!" he grumbled. "It's so long to Loanzah's house and it's no fun walking when you can't run."

"I know it isn't. But, with this cake in my hands I wouldn't be able to keep up with you if you did."

"I could hold the cake for you!" Emilio offered, reaching up to relieve Kichoro of her confectionary burden.

"But then," she started, holding the dessert just out of his reach. "If you held the cake, how would you be able to run?"

"Oh, yeah." he said, turning and kicking a pebble in his path.

Kichoro smiled. "Cheer up, my dear. We are not far from Leah's house."

"How much farther until we get there?" he asked, his attention still focused on the pebble at his feet.

"Oh, I'd say we're... there."

"Huh?" Emilio said, as he withdrew his attention from his game to look up at his surroundings. Sure enough, there, just beyond a rocky wall leading to a shallow clearing was the Leonius house. A look of sheer merriment lit up the child's face as he sprinted off toward the modest home. Suddenly, he stopped in his flight and turned to his mother asking, "Is it okay if I run ahead, Mama?"

"I think I can manage from here. You may go."

"Thank you, Mama!" he exclaimed and was off.

Kichoro watched her son scamper off and smiled at his mirth. For that reason and no other, she was glad that she decided to accept Leahtrah's offer. Alone to her thoughts, she sighed in trepidation. She was not looking forward to the evening. Yet, as it was, it was too late to turn back, now. Resolutely, she continued on.

When she finally reached her friend's home, she saw that the house had been decorated with small, ornate lanterns and streams of thin colored banners. The children had made pictures and signs to welcome their kin to their home and had plastered them all about the house. Kichoro could very easily see the love the children held for their family. Her heart slightly lightened by that thought, she approached the front door and gave it a gentle knock.

"If that's you, Kiki, come on in!" she heard Leahtrah roar from the other side of the enclosure. Following her instruction, Kichoro opened the door and strode in.

"Oh my!" she gasped, for the house that Leahtrah and the kittens worked to clean earlier that day lay in utter ruin. A chair was overturned at her feet and a portion of food stained the floor to her left. A lamp lay shattered by a table that somehow managed to lose a leg. For a moment, Kichoro entertained the thought that bandits had ransacked the abode, but, if that were the case, surely Leahtrah would not still be within it. Still...

"Leah, are you alright?" she called.

"I'm fine." she all but growled. "But my house, on the other hand..."

Following the sound of her friend's voice, Kichoro navigated the house until she came to the kitchen where she found the woman kneeling on the floor scrubbing ferociously at something that was stuck there. The scowl on her face and the dirt and water stains that colored her clothing suggested that she had been at it for quite a while.

"Stars above, Leah, what happened?" Kichoro asked, setting the cake down upon a vacant spot on the counter and kneeling down before her.

"Let's just say, there were too many kittens to hold under one roof." she replied.

"I didn't know that Thorin's brothers had kittens." she said, reaching into a nearby bucket and pulling out a soapy rag.

"They don't." she said, flatly. "But, you wouldn't know that from the looks of things here."

"You mean they did all this?"

"And Thorin and Loanzah and Milpul!"

Kichoro chuckled. "But, not Kemal?"

Leahtrah sighed then found herself chuckling, too. "You know, it's never Kemal. My sweet, shy son. And speaking of shy, just what do you think you're doing?"

"Huh?" she replied with genuine confusion.

Gently, Leahtrah took the damp cloth from her friend's hands and replaced it into the bucket. "This is not for you and neither is this where you should be."

"But, I-"

"Go." she ordered. "Enjoy yourself. Have a little fun. We all need to, now and then."

Kichoro sighed, deeply. "Very well. If it pleases you." Heavily, she rose to her feet and retrieved the cake she had brought. "What shall I do with this?"

"That isn't one of your honey cream cakes, is it?"

"It is."

"Hmm..." she mused, playfully. "It would almost serve them right if you and I sat here and enjoyed that. But then the way Thorin's nose works I'm surprised he hasn't-"

"Hey! I smell cake!" Thorin said, poking his head into the kitchen.

"Right on time." Leahtrah grinned.

"Well done, Leah." Kichoro giggled.

"What was that?" Thorin asked, not privy to the joke the two women shared.

"It was nothing, Dear." Leahtrah chuckled.

"Nothing, eh?" he mused, a cheeky grin coloring his visage. "Well, I guess since Ki brought cake, we can leave it at that. Smells like... honey cream!" he declared, reaching for a taste of the milky icing that covered the cake.

"It is," Kichoro said, moving the cake out of his reach. "And you'll get none of it until Leah is relieved from this work."

"She's right, Leah." Thorin agreed. "Join us. We can only do so much damage in the backyard. You can finish this later."

"I... can?" Leahtrah replied, pointedly.

"Uh-... that is to say, the kittens and I can finish this, of course!" he amended, hastily.

"Ah, well since you put it that way..." she said, climbing to her feet. "Oh! Kiki, let me take that for you."

"Tut, tut! You've done enough. I can manage this. Why don't you... have a little fun." she said, wisely.

Leahtrah smiled, warmly. "I suppose I can't argue with that."

"Indeed, you cannot." she agreed.

"You know, if you must hold something..." Thorin said, extending his arm to her.

A sensation of sheer romance overtook Leahtrah as she gently encircled his arm with her hands and fell into his warmth. He lightly pulled her against him and, together, they strode to the door that lead to the back of the house. In an instant, they were gone.

Kichoro watched them go, a profound longing tugging inside her breast. Her legs suddenly became weak and shaky. It took all the resolve she held within her being to stay standing. She had come all this way and would not surrender to the ghosts of her past, now. Rigidly, she set one foot before the other and took a brave step, then another and another until she, too, was gone.

Outside, she found that the decoration in the backyard mirrored the decoration that adorned the front. The lanterns that were strewn along the facade of the house, along with the few that hung from he branches of nearby trees and the couple that sat upon the food-filled tables she saw bathed the area in a peaceful, golden glow. Although Leahtrah and Thorin were nowhere to be seen, she could hear the sound of laughter and shouting coming from the side of the house. She smiled at the thought then moved toward the tables to set her cake there, when...

"**LOOK OUT**!" she heard someone shout.

"Huh?" she gasped, turning just in time to see someone running straight toward her. There was very little space separating her from the oncoming person and no time to react. With her options nil, she shut her eyes tight, raised her hands high, holding the cake above her head and hoped that it would survive the collision. All at once she felt the stranger plow into her and felt her feet leave the ground. Although, to her surprise, she didn't feel the pain she anticipated one would feel after suffering through a crash. Instead, she felt as though she were flying. She was literally spinning in the air. She wondered how long it would take her body to return to the earth. Surely, then, the hurt she expected to feel before would come once she did.

"STOP! STOP! EVERYONE STOP!" she heard someone shout. "We've got a lady on the field."

"Does that mean the ball is out of play?" she heard another ask, followed by a loud whacking sound and an "OUCH!" from the one who has posed the question.

"Milady, are you alright?" she heard someone, the first one, ask.

She was alright. She couldn't believe it, but she was unhurt. How could that be? Slowly, she opened one eye and then the other, yet somehow, something wasn't quite right. The world seemed smaller, somehow. There were faces looking at her, some she had never seen, while others she recognized immediately. Yet, one thing puzzled her...why were they so far down beneath her?

"Uh, here, allow me to take that for you." a voice said, followed by a hand reaching up passed her own. Surprised, she followed the hand down to the arm and finally to the body which it belonged to. There, she found a pair of rust-colored eyes looking up beyond her while a strong arm held her firmly about the waist. So, he was the reason why the world looked so small.

"Ah, there we are." he said, once he secured the dessert from her hands. "If I set you down, do you think you can stand?"

She nodded her affirmation. Gently, he lowered her lithe form to the ground, which was quite a journey from the position where he held her. She noticed that he actually had to bend his knees to get her back to solid earth.

"I'm very sorry, Milady. We probably shouldn't have been running around the corner of the house like that. Are you hurt at all?" he asked.

"No. I am alright. Thank you." Kichoro replied.

He smiled. "I'm glad to hear it. Oh! I've been rude." he said, as he extended his hand to her. "My name is Trajan. Trajan Leonius."

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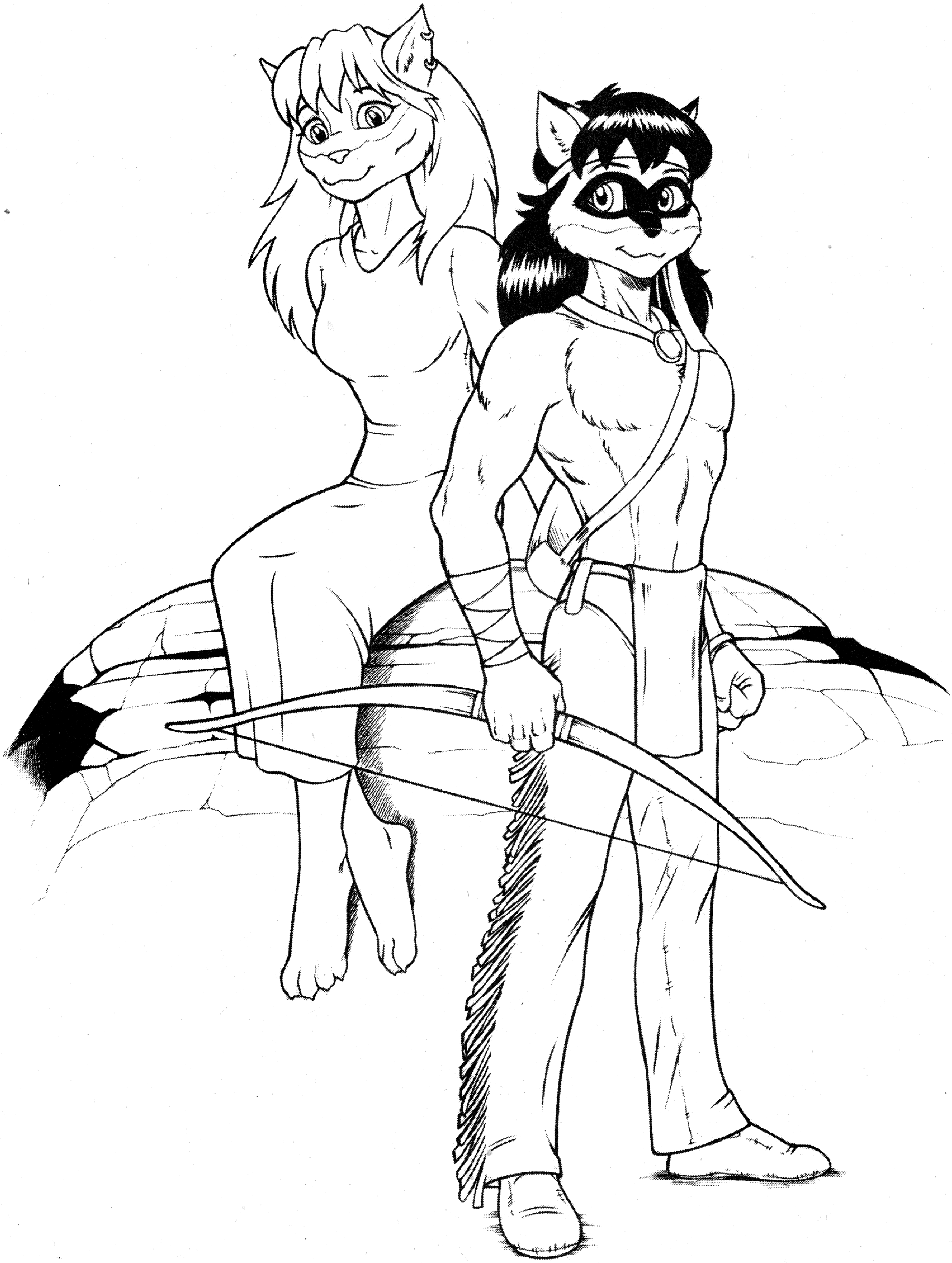

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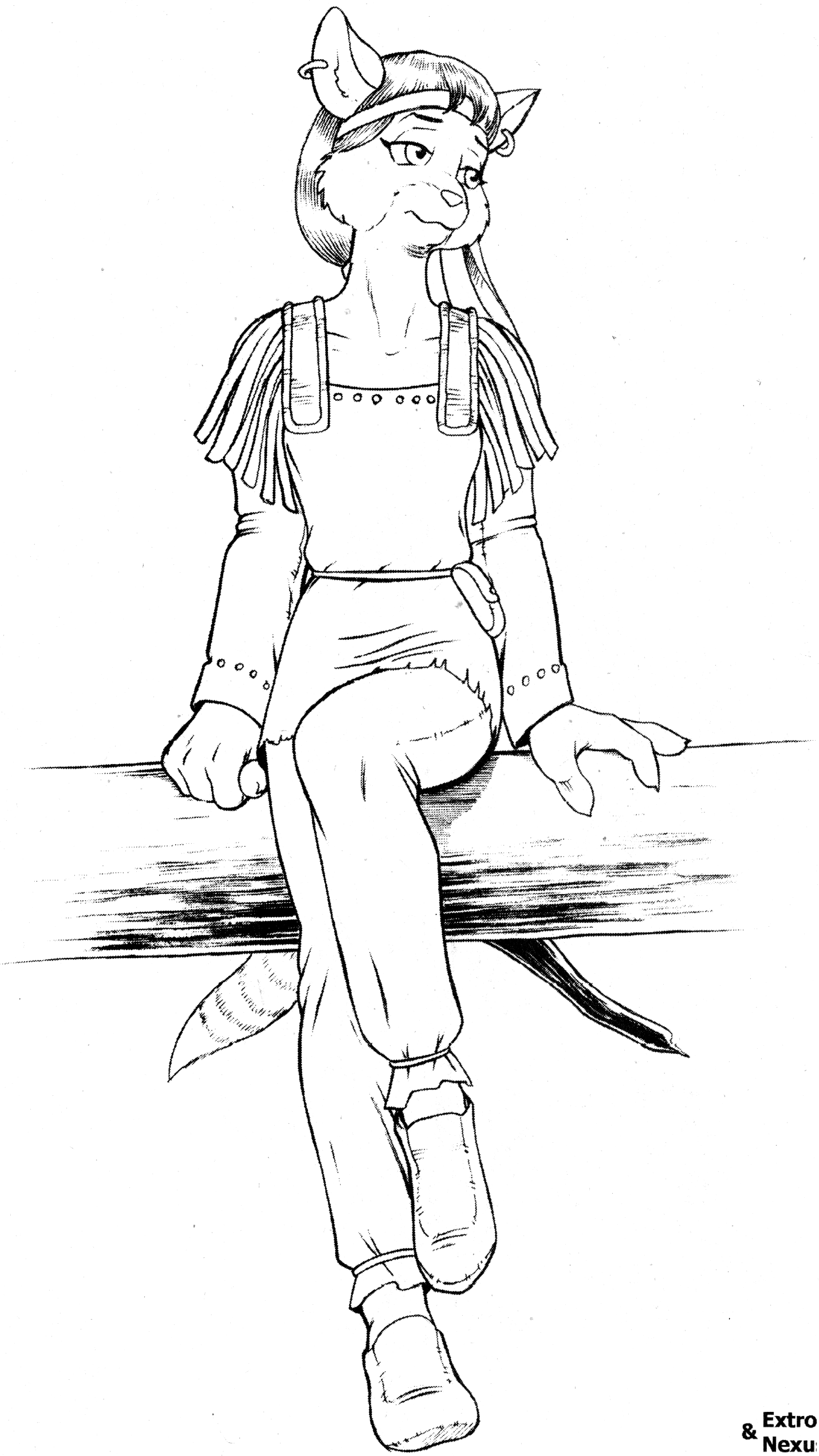

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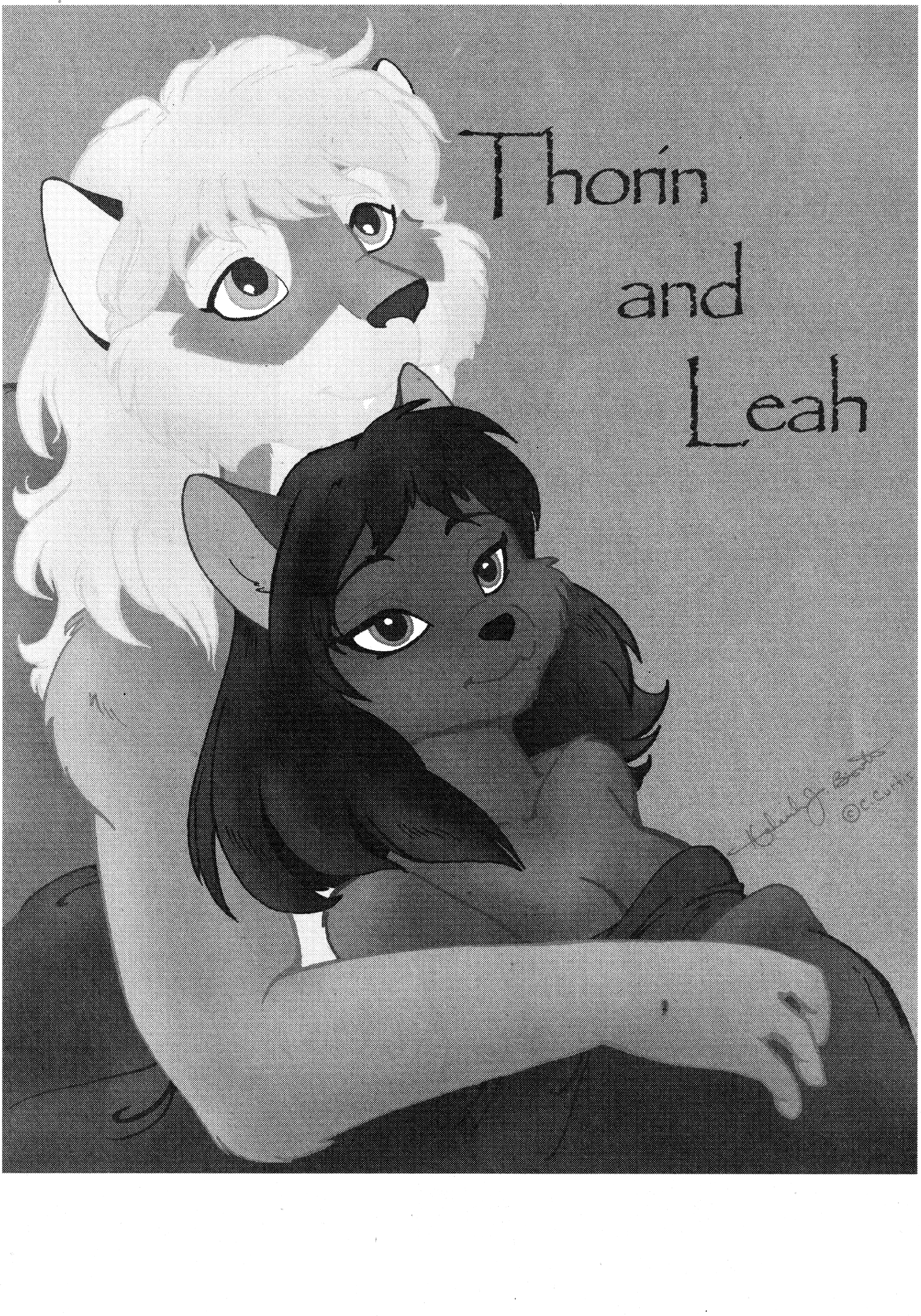
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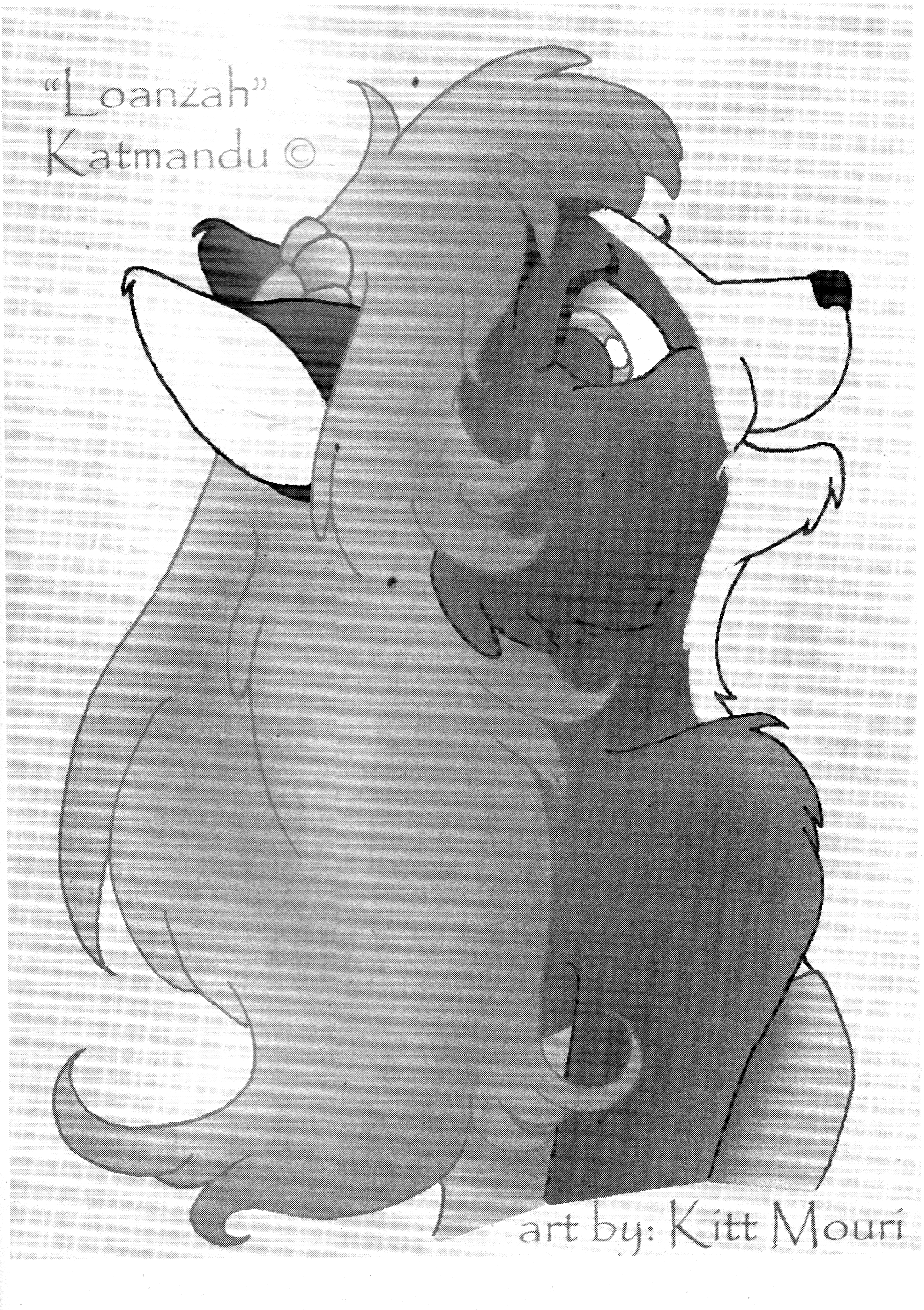

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